

WACSeries Op-Ed
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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION: Meaning and Relevance for Nonprofit Organisations

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Franck Sombo is a goal-oriented person with the drive to lead self and others to influence productivity and efficiency. His work involves supporting organisations to develop strategic plans, design monitoring and evaluation systems, develop and use relevant performance measurement tools to track progress, assess organisational growth and institutionalise learning. He has a rich experience in Project Management, Capacity Development, Data Analytics, Training and Facilitation, Mentoring and Coaching, among others. Franck has nine years of experience working with WACSI where he currently serves as the Head, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. He also manages the Institute's Technology Donation programme, Techsoup West Africa, in partnership with Techsoup, a US-based social enterprise focused on supporting nonprofit organisations to increase their productivity and maximise their social impact leveraging technology.

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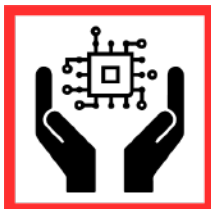
About WACSeries

WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSeries

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.



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I - Introduction

Technology has invaded our daily lives and has changed the way we go about work. However, technology seems to have changed more significantly the way individuals interact than the extent to which organisations are transforming.

The term “technology” from the Greek origin *technologia* means automatic. According to Encyclopedia Britannica¹, technology finds its origin in the 17th century and was initially used to refer to discussion of applied arts, before gradually embracing a growing range of means, processes and ideas, in addition to the tools and machines. Wikipedia² further suggests that technology, i.e. “science of craft”, from its Greek root (*technē*, meaning art, skill; and *-logia*, meaning discourse, speech) is the sum of techniques, skills, methods, and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives. It adds that technology can be the knowledge of techniques, processes or it can be embedded in machines to allow for operation without detailed knowledge of their workings.

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/technology/history-of-technology>
² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technology>

Often, the idea of technology surfaces a certain paradox, a battle between the good and the bad or a journey into the unknown. The question however is not whether it is useful, but how we use it. In the 21st century, marked by the fourth industrial revolution, there are both enormous opportunities and growing pressures³ for organisations to devise strategies to face the rising challenges of the digital era.

The nonprofit sector, like other sectors of society is confronted with the challenge of positioning itself against the tides of the digital age. How can nonprofit organisations better leverage the benefits of technology to support and drive sustainable growth and transformation? What is the role of technology in transforming organisations to achieve their goals? What is digital transformation? Is it necessary? What are the steps an organisation needs to take to achieve its digital transformation?

³ John Hagel III (08 October, 2014). *Turn the pressures of technology into potential*, Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2014/10/turn-the-pressures-of-technology-into-potential>



III - Three Perspectives that Influence Technology Adoption

These are three philosophical perspectives that underpin the adoption and application of technology in an organisation.

1. Technology as a tool

In some nonprofit organisational settings, many think of technology as the replacement of hard copy documents with new and more sophisticated tools to facilitate access to information and reduce volumes of files on the shelves. This is true to a large extent, as technology enables an organisation to digitise its documentation and facilitate storage and retrieval of information to facilitate the work. But digital transformation goes beyond that. Classically, we can identify three main ways that nonprofit organisations can adopt and apply technology to influence the way they work⁴.

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2. Technology as a solution

This is the stage of “digitalisation” or “operational transformation”. Organisations begin to focus more on improving their internal processes. They have a focus on ensuring process optimization and efficiency. The focus is on using IT to support a wide range of components of programmes and operational approaches across the organisation. They set aside budget for IT and tend to hire part-time or permanent IT personnel. Organisations in this category do have a website which is mostly dynamic, fairly up to date, with integration to social media. They begin to get insights into the data they are amassing and tend to use them to support operations and programmes delivery. Organisations can identify and select software applications that respond to and support work effectiveness. Gradually, they perceive the need to remove or reduce the heavy-lift hardware to focus on delivering content optimally through the adoption of useful technological solutions including cloud-based applications. The areas most impacted at this level, beyond direct IT personnel, include broadly staff and volunteers since they are involved in using the applications and implementing programmes and operations. This in turn, reflects on the impact of the organisation.

3. Technology as a culture

This stage is marked by a “disruptive approach” or “organisational transformation”. Beyond digitalising, nonprofit organisations at this stage develop a culture of thinking about technology as part of the strategy of the organisation. Organisations at this stage focus on impact at scale, replicability, innovation and building models. The organisational website is not optional but an integral part of building and maintaining a brand that aligns with the values and culture of the organisation. Furthermore, organisations consistently generate and use insights from website and social media as a core aspect and part of the process for designing products and services. Cloud integration is not just meant to phase out hardware or help with efficiency but integrated in a holistic mission delivery strategy. With digital technologies, organisations are able to uncover peculiar needs of those they serve and ensure they create new value for their beneficiaries by

streamlining their systems to meet these needs. They can redefine the roles for the IT persons who become more creative into defining and supporting processes that generate higher value and ensure optimal security and performance of the organisation. The areas impacted at this stage include the IT personnel, staff and volunteers, donors and beneficiaries, with significant effects on the outcomes, mission and impact of the organisation.



Without being restrictive, the above outlined tiers provide a fair depiction of how organisations map out along the digital transformation continuum. It is therefore essential to identify key steps that could help nonprofit organisations thrive and pursue their cause and to sustain their digital transformation. The proposed following steps provide some detailed guidelines in the drive to digital transformation.



IV - How to Drive Digital Transformation: From Technology as a Tool to Technology as a Culture

Digital transformation requires organisations to be intentional and honest about their own assessment to enable them to take the relevant actions needed to move to the next level. Below is a 4-step process that organisations can adopt in their drive to the so desired transformation. They consist of; 1) assessment, 2) education about the importance and benefits of the technology resources, 3) how to adopt and integrate the relevant technological solutions and lastly 4) how to achieve and sustain organisational transformation leveraging digital technologies.

1. Assess

Embarking on a digital transformation journey requires an organisation to develop insights into its current standing. Conducting an assessment at this stage is essential to identify the organisation's digital maturity⁵ level. Insights from such an exercise would help the organisation to ascertain its strengths and identify priority areas for improvement, which would inform steps to consider in subsequent stages.

A 'Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats' (SWOT) analysis approach can be used as a practical way to take a snapshot of the organisation's current situation. By this, the organisation can map out its strengths in using digital technologies and objectively identifies its weaknesses. Also, by scanning its environment to identify the opportunities available

⁵ Techsoup has conceptualised a [digital maturity model](#) as a cornerstone of its Digital Transformation Initiative

as well as the external factors that threaten its effectiveness, the organisation can define key actions that would help to maximise its strengths and leverage on potential opportunities to mitigate its weaknesses and pre-empt the external challenges or threats. Findings from such an exercise will help to identify key remedial steps including scoping areas for further information and education as well as facilitate a smooth and effective adoption of digital technologies to drive its transformation.

2. Educate

Nonprofit organisations at the early stage of their digital transformation journey would benefit from awareness raising and education on the role and importance of technology, existing products and services that could be useful to support their mission, their benefits and application to support their work. However, many organisations do not have easy access to relevant information that could help to make timely and appropriate decision regarding the tools that would facilitate their work, especially genuine ones that do not involve huge investments. For example, some nonprofit organisations are unaware of the existence of the [Techsoup technology donation programme](#), which provides access to highly subsidised products and services that can help them to maximise their impact and support their sustainability. Techsoup also enables access to customised training through online courses designed to guide and help organisations make the best use of the technology resources they need to achieve their mandate.

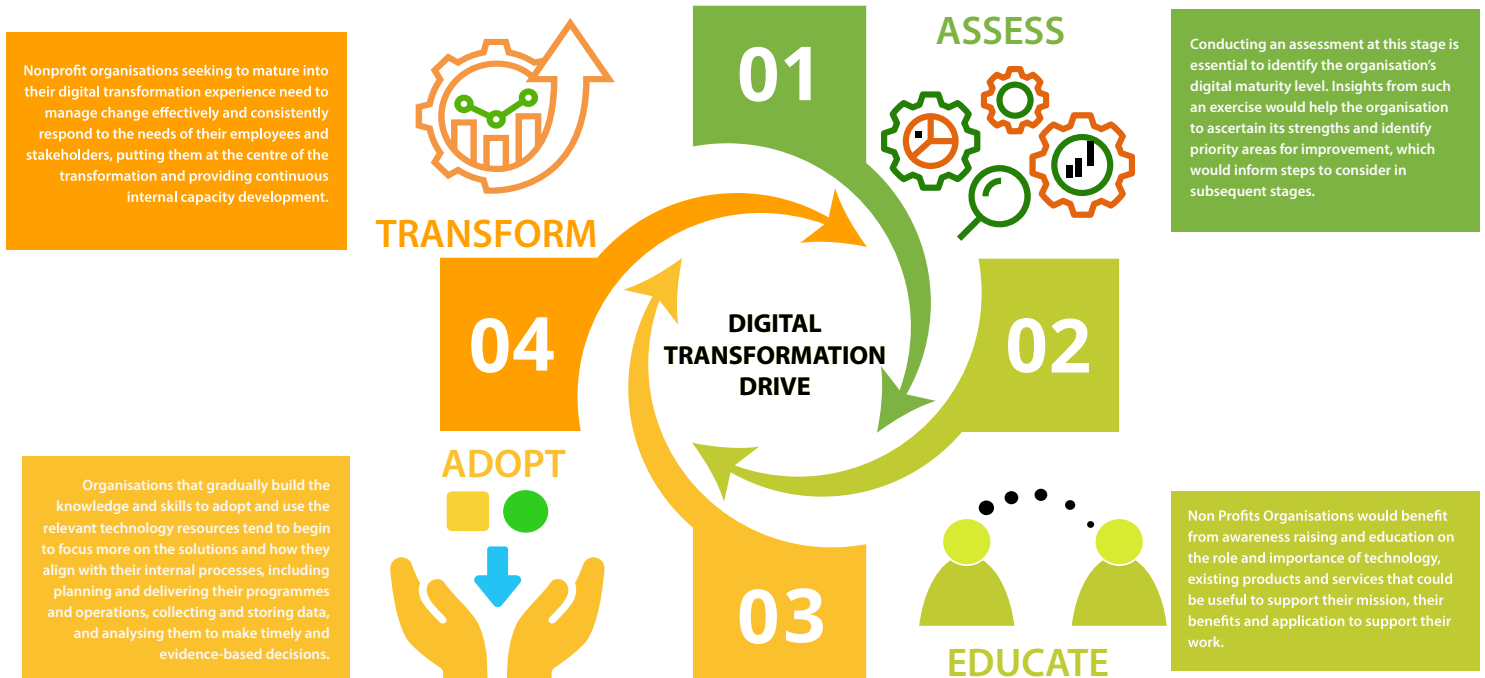
3. Adopt

Organisations that gradually build the knowledge and skills to adopt and use the relevant technology resources tend to begin to focus more on the solutions and how they align with their internal processes, including planning and delivering their programmes and operations, collecting and storing data, and analysing them to make timely and evidence-based decisions. These organisations soon begin to look at solutions that reduce the internal tensions of fixing bugs and maintaining hardware equipment and desktop applications. They consider turning to cloud solutions to focus on maximising the benefits of the applications and generate insights to inform programming and operations in a more efficient and productive manner. They need support to manage and enjoy the transition to the cloud and also to build processes that integrate their existing system.

4. Transform

Organisations that become adept at leveraging the benefits of intuitive technological resources, including working seamlessly across teams and building on

the intelligence provided by the modern digital technologies they use, may develop the impression that a major ambition has been achieved. However, they need not to lose sight of the bigger picture, and realise that the most important transformational factor in an organisation remains the people, and people are influenced through culture. Nonprofit organisations seeking to mature into their digital transformation experience need to manage change effectively and consistently respond to the needs of their employees and stakeholders, putting them at the centre of the transformation and providing continuous internal capacity development. These organisations need support to manage current technologies and ensure that the changes driven by their rapid adoption of the technology form an integral part of their strategic orientation and culture. They must develop their agility and flexibility to innovate, to achieve impact at scale and design models that are easy to replicate for continuous growth and improvements.





V - Conclusion

Digital transformation is an ongoing process. It requires nonprofit organisations to not only strive to integrate technological tools but also seek to align their operational processes to become more efficient, leveraging on modern applications. Most essentially, they should be able to streamline technology in the strategy and integrate into the organisational culture and invest in the people that make up the most valued resource of any organisation. This includes redefining engagement with both internal and external stakeholders, improving the ability to listen and receive feedback, and creating spaces for creativity and innovation to spur growth that impacts the life of people, not as a random act but as part of the DNA of the organisation.

The four steps listed above provide basic guidelines of nonprofit organisations' journey to their digital transformation, starting from assessment, education, adoption and transformation.

However, a few questions remain as to what the main barriers to nonprofit organisations' digital transformation are. Who should be leading the digital transformation agenda within these organisations? How do nonprofit organisations build digital competencies?

These are further interrogations worth exploring, which we would be considering in our next publications on the topic. Do you have any thoughts or comments about these? Feel free to share your views and perspectives on the topic to advance knowledge in this relatively new field of practice within the nonprofit sector.

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